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Literary Nationalism in Central Asia: The Role of Soviet Uzbek Writers in the Creation of Post-Soviet National Identity of Uzbekistan

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Abstract. The research examines the issue of literary nationalism in Central Asia through the case of Uzbekistan. Employing a constructivist approach, authors analyze how the Uzbek SSR's writers influenced the formation of a post-Soviet canon of Uzbek national heroes, thereby establishing the continuity between different forms of nationalism. The research traces the development of Uzbek national self-consciousness from the late 19th century, when the Jadid movement sought to modernize the educational system in Turkestan. The driving force of nation-building in Uzbekistan became the Soviet nationalities policy, whose primary objective was the consolidation of a vast number of premodern communities along a single — namely, national — criterion to successfully implement the overarching state project of industrialization. In particular, the research addresses the impact of the primordialization of national identities in the 1930s on Soviet citizens' perceptions of their national self-identification and identifies the main challenges encountered by the nation-building project in the Uzbek SSR. In the socio-cultural and historical context, the research elucidates the role played by the three major Uzbek writers in the development of national self-consciousness within their republic, providing, in broad terms, the biographical information necessary for understanding the topic. The primary focus is placed on an analysis of three novels — “*The Treasures of Ulughbeg*”, “*Navoi*”, and “*Starry Nights*” — devoted to the late medieval history of Uzbekistan. According to the authors, it was in these such works that writers popularized specific historical figures who would become cultural pillars of nationalism in Uzbekistan after the USSR collapse.

Keywords: intellectuals, primordialization, Mawarannahr, Turkestan, enlightenment, novel

Contribution of authors. Arman Kaumen — the conception of the study, the collection and processing of materials, and writing the manuscript. Saken Mukan — design of the study, collection, and processing of materials.

Conflict of interest. The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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Литературный национализм в Центральной Азии: роль советских узбекских писателей в формировании постсоветской национальной идентичности Узбекистана

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Аннотация. В исследовании рассматривается проблема литературного национализма в Центральной Азии на примере Узбекистана. Используя конструктивистский подход, авторы анализируют, как писатели Узбекской ССР повлияли на формирование постсоветского канона узбекских национальных героев, тем самым устанавливая преемственность между различными формами национализма. В исследовании прослеживается развитие узбекского национального самосознания с конца XIX в., когда движение джадидов стремилось модернизировать систему образования в Туркестане. Движущей силой государственного строительства в Узбекистане стала советская национальная политика, главной целью которой была консолидация огромного числа досовременных сообществ по единому, а именно национальному, критерию для успешной реализации всеобъемлющего государственного проекта индустриализации. В частности, в исследовании рассматривается влияние примордиализации национальной идентичности в 1930-е гг. на восприятие советскими гражданами своей национальной самоидентификации и выявляются основные проблемы, с которыми столкнулся проект государственного строительства в Узбекской ССР. В социокультурном и историческом контексте исследование раскрывает роль, которую сыграли три крупнейших узбекских писателя в развитии национального самосознания в своей республике, предоставляя, в общих чертах, биографическую информацию, необходимую для понимания темы. Основное внимание уделяется анализу трех романов — «Сокровища Улугбека», «Навои» и «Звездные ночи», — посвященных позднесредневековой истории Узбекистана. По словам авторов, именно в этих произведениях писатели популяризировали конкретные исторические личности, которые стали культурными столпами национализма в Узбекистане после распада СССР.

Ключевые слова: интеллектуалы, примордиализация, Мавераннахр, Туркестан, просвещение, роман

Вклад авторов. Арман Каумен — концепция исследования, сбор и обработка материалов, а также написание рукописи. Сакен Мукан — замысел исследования, сбор и обработка материалов.

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Introduction

In recent years, Central Asia's importance in international politics has steadily increased. Against the backdrop of geopolitical confrontation among the major world powers, the region — owing to its geographical location, substantial natural resource reserves, and significant development potential — has attracted growing attention from key state and non-state actors in global politics. Effective engagement with the countries of this region requires a deep understanding of their national economies, local political systems, and indigenous cultures. This is particularly true of Uzbekistan, that is one of the most influential state in Central Asia today.

From the security perspective in Central Asia, the issue of national identity has acquired particular relevance, as its study enables a better understanding not only of individual states as well as of the region as a whole. In Uzbekistan, the Turkestan intellectuals played a direct role in the development of local nationalism at the end of the 19th century. Uzbek national identity itself was ultimately formed only after the October Revolution, largely as a result of Soviet nationalities policy. During the same period, an entire cohort of national writers emerged, whose works in the postwar era would, to a certain extent, serve as the cultural foundation for post-Soviet national myths. Among these writers, such outstanding figures as Oybek (Musa Tashmukhammedov), Pirimqul Qodirov, and Odil Yoqubov deserve particular attention for the researchers. Their major novels (*“Navoi”*, *Ulugh Beg's Treasures*, and *Starry Nights*) prepared the cultural ground for the post-Soviet canonization of such historical figures as Alisher Navoi, Amir Timur, Mirzo Ulughbeg, and Babur.

In examining Uzbek nationalism, this study employs a constructivist approach, according to which any major social phenomenon or collective actor is historically contingent and therefore cannot be taken for granted. The phenomenon of Uzbek national identity is thus considered, to a certain extent, through the lens of classical theories of nationalism [1–4]. Consequently, Uzbek nationalism appears as a social construct embedded within the specific chronological and cultural-political frameworks.

Predecessors of Uzbek Nationalism

In the pre-revolutionary era, the territory of Turkestan¹ — where the greater part of present day Uzbekistan is located — was inhabited by various sedentary premodern communities with major cultural and political-administrative urban centers. For a long time, the Great Silk Road passed through the region, fostering trade, scholarship, and diverse urban crafts [5]. Nevertheless, by the 1917 Revolution, no consolidated national movement with a clearly articulated nation-building project existed in the region by and large. By the beginning of the 20th century, Turkestan was characterized by a high degree of socio-cultural fragmentation, that generated the numerous cleavages [6]. Tensions existed between the Islamic clergy and the secular intelligentsia, between the indigenous population and Russian settlers, between nomadic and sedentary lifestyles, and between urban and provincial modes of existence. Of particular importance was the conflict between the Turkic-speaking and Persian-speaking populations that acquired an ethno-national character over time [7. P. 11–29; 8. P. 88–89].

Under these conditions, local secular intellectuals tended to orient themselves toward the still-existing Ottoman Empire, where the ideas of pan-Islamism and pan-Turkism were actively developing. In the absence of a detailed national project, these ideologies could serve as a spiritual foundation for uniting Turkestan into a single political community. This concept was supported by the Jadids, advocates of local enlightenment and educational reform [9]. Opposing the colonial policies of Tsarism, they invited for the unification of the sedentary Muslims of Turkestan, whose literary language was to be Chagatai² [8. P. 14–18, 42–46]. The Jadids were actively engaged in promoting literacy among the population of Turkestan through the establishment of so-called new-method schools, where secular subjects were taught alongside Islamic theology. In addition, they published various newspapers and journals [10]. However, in the pre-revolutionary period, their position remained precarious, as they confronted not only powerful clerical elite that wielded high authority in society but also an opposition from the local political authorities and bodies, especially in the Emirate of Bukhara and the Khanate of Khiva [8. P. 29–33; 11. С. 31–35]. Ultimately, the first attempt to establish Turkestani

¹ The historical and geographical region encompassing the territory of present-day Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, southern Kazakhstan, and parts of Turkmenistan.

² A Turkic literary language that was actively used in the territory of Mawarannahr and the Khanate of Bukhara from the late medieval period until the 18th century.

statehood was undertaken in November 1917 in that part of the region that had been fully integrated into the Russian Empire³. This attempt, however, proved unsuccessful. The newly established political entity, known as the Kokand Autonomy, existed for only a few months duration [12].

After the October Socialist Revolution, some Jadids began to cooperate with the Turkestani supporters of the Bolsheviks, who called themselves Muslim communists. Under the pretext of spreading the revolution among the Turkic origins beyond Russia's core territories, the latter sought to create a unified Turkic republic led by a Turkic Communist Party, that provoked a skeptical reaction from Moscow [8. P. 107–116]. The existence of other national movements in those parts of Russia where Turkic ethnic groups predominated⁴ also negatively affected the implementation of this project. Ultimately, the Jadid idea of statehood was realized only in a limited part of Turkestan [13; 14]. It was this part that came to be known as Uzbekistan.

The Birth of Uzbek National Identity

After the end of the First World War, the Soviet Union, as the world's first anti-capitalist state, was — due to its vast territory and extensive resource foundation — more likely than other powers to become a primary target in a new military conflict in Europe. In this context, the state's leadership, headed by I.V. Stalin, decided to overcome technological and economic backwardness through the comprehensive industrialization [15. P. 16–39]. Beyond establishing thousands of industrial enterprises and training hundreds of thousands of skilled professionals, this process required consolidating a large number of culturally fragmented communities that had inhabited the territory of the Russian Empire prior to its collapse (political transformation). Such consolidation primarily entailed the unification of thousands of premodern socio-cultural formations into a limited number of political nations. This task was especially relevant in the eastern peripheries of the former empire, where tribal, local, and religious forms of self-identification prevailed over ethno-national ones [7. P. 11–29; 13. P. 30–46; 16].

The Bolsheviks not only granted local indigenous ethnic groups the right to self-determination but also sought to awaken national consciousness through the development of national cultures, the training of administrative cadres, and the creation of territorial autonomy. At the same time, in order to avoid any forms of national oppression, affirmative nation-building in the USSR presupposed the primacy of class (proletariat) identity over national identity. Consequently, any manifestations of nationalism that contradicted the official policy of the Communist Party were automatically rejected, as they could hinder the consolidation of Soviet society at a supranational level [17. P. 10–15; 18]. A similar selective approach was

³ This part of the empire was known as the Turkestan Governor-Generalship.

⁴ This refers primarily to the eastern part of the Desht-i-Qipchak steppe, where present-day Kazakhstan and the Volga region are located.

applied, for example, to Islam: while its external attributes became an integral part of the traditions of many Soviet Eastern peoples (in the Caucasus, the Volga region, and Central Asia), its genuine “sacral” content was effectively bracketed out [8. P. 342–362; 19. P. 179–185].

With the Bolsheviks’ rise to power in Russia, nationalism was regarded as a progressive product of capitalism, whose utility lay in overcoming the feudal past. Any attempts to elevate one ethnic group above another were to be suppressed by the dictatorship of the proletariat [20. P. 65–66]. Nevertheless, after the adoption of the course policy toward building socialism in a single country in the 1930s, it became necessary to shield the Soviet nations from a hostile capitalist environment. As a result, their identities were subjected to primordialization. At the same time, the implementation of full-scale industrialization required the constant affiliation of citizens with the specific political-administrative units, that took the form of national autonomies established in the 1920s. Nationality thus became an inherited form of self-identification for Soviet citizens, endowing it with a supra-historical character. Concurrently, the Soviet policy of the “friendship of peoples” helped maintain positive relations among the representatives of different nationalities. The Russian language and its culture served as the unifying elements of all Soviet nations: the former as an instrument of interethnic communication, and the latter as a means of mutual understanding at the mental level [17. P. 394–460; 21. P. 331–355; 22. P. 253–274].

The Soviet approach to nation-building was naturally projected onto Uzbekistan, where no developed capitalist societies had existed in the pre-revolutionary period. The modern borders of the state were delineated during the national-territorial delimitation of Central Asia in 1924 [13. P. 180–210; 23. P. 19–25]. In addition to infrastructure development and the creation of industrial enterprises within the framework of comprehensive industrialization, the Bolsheviks actively promoted the construction of Uzbek national identity. Drawing on diverse cultural elements from the pre-revolutionary Turkestan political-administrative formations, Soviet scholars, together with the local intellectuals, created an Uzbek mass “folk culture”⁵. At the same time, national “high culture”⁶ and historiography were developed. Of particular importance during the nation-building process were the standardization of the Uzbek language, the introduction of a unified education system, and the training of administrative cadres from among the indigenous population [8. P. 258–286; 19. P. 134–172; 21. P. 185–195]. Later, during the primordialization of the 1930s, the Uzbek nation was endowed with deep historical roots. All buildings, personalities, and communities that had ever existed

⁵ National folklore, traditions, and customs.

⁶ Classical literature, music, and painting emphasizing the maturity of the nation. In the context of nation-building, the construction of “high culture” is generally accompanied by the establishment of modern/Westernized cultural institutions and the introduction of European academic genres (such as the novel and symphonic music) into the national cultural sphere.

or resided within the territory of the newly established Uzbek SSR were automatically appropriated as a part of its national heritage [19. P. 218–224].

Despite the high degree of socio-cultural heterogeneity in Turkestan, the Bolshevik construction of a unified Uzbek national identity encountered few serious difficulties. Various non-indigenous ethno-cultural elements that arrived in the sedentary parts of Central Asia during the industrialization were either fully absorbed by the densely populated Uzbek milieu or developed alongside it. This made it possible both to consolidate the republic's population along national lines and to internalize Soviet principles of internationalism and the "friendship of peoples" [23. P. 23–31; 24]. Nevertheless, there were some problems. Many historical figures and cities were recognized as intrinsically Uzbek solely because they were located within the territory of the modern Uzbek nation-state. This, in turn, gave rise to conflicts on ethno-linguistic and political grounds, as Turkic-speaking populations in Turkestan had long lived alongside Persian-speaking communities. Following the delimitation of Soviet Central Asia in 1924, many Persian-speaking regions were incorporated into the Turkic (Uzbek) republic, a decision that initially met with a little resistance from the Persian elite circles, which had coexisted relatively harmoniously with the Turkic population.

However, after the Tajik SSR establishment in 1929, this arrangement came under sharp criticism. Ancient cities such as Samarkand, Bukhara, and Jizzakh began to be regarded by the representatives of the newly formed nation as historically Tajik territories, since the majority of their population spoke Persian. At the same time, their geographical proximity to Tajikistan only exacerbated the situation [7. P. 186–195; 8. P. 291–315; 13. P. 149–158]. For this reason, the Turkic-Persian cleavage would become one of the main obstacles to national consolidation in Uzbekistan throughout the 20th and early 21st centuries. Under the Soviet conditions, this contradiction was mitigated through the widespread promotion of the "friendship of peoples". At the republican level, the foreign element was also subjected to the cultural assimilation in an effort to justify the inclusion of Persian-speaking territories within Uzbekistan. Writers played an important role in this process, as their literary works — primarily on historical themes — became, in a sense, instruments of cultural reconciliation between Turkic and Persian elements within the framework of a unified Uzbek national identity. The creative nature of national belles-lettres also made it possible to periodically transcend generally accepted ethno-cultural and geographical boundaries. The development of this process was most strongly influenced by such writers as Oybek, Pirimqul Qodirov, and Odil Yoqubov.

Uzbek National Intelligentsia

The flourishing of socialist literature among many of the Soviet Union's indigenous ethnic groups occurred in the postwar period, when the state had overcome the hardships of the first half of the 20th century. By that time, an entirely new generation of writers had already emerged in Uzbekistan. The novel's literary

genre developed particularly dynamically, serving as a lens through that not only pressing social issues as well as historical themes were explored. The latter were at times subject to significant distortions in national historiography due to the primordialist approach. Many historical questions were examined within the boundaries of existing nation-states, despite the artificial nature of their political-administrative borders. Fiction, although it did not contradict political canons, introduced certain modifications into these frameworks.

One figure who engaged with historical questions in his literary works was the celebrated Soviet writer Musa Tashmukhamedov (1905–1968), better known by his pen name, Oybek. He was one of the few surviving intellectuals who began his literary career in the prewar period, when the contours of Uzbek national identity were still being formed. Having experienced the revolutionary upheavals in his formative years, Musa effectively became a man of two eras, that allowed him to occupy a special place not only in Uzbek as well as in world literature. He was highly esteemed by the prominent figures of Soviet culture such as Aleksandr Fadeev, Sergei Borodin, Mirzo Tursunzade, and Mukhtar Auevov [25. P. 233, 258]. From 1945 to 1949, he served as a chairman of the Writers' Union at the republican level and was also an honorary member of the National Academy of Sciences [25. P. 221, 225].

In his oeuvre, the particular importance is attached to such prose works as the novels *“Sacred Blood”*, *“The Great Path”*, and *“Navoi”*. The latter is of special significance for the construction of a pantheon for Uzbek national heroes. The novel is devoted to the one of the greatest poets and statesmen of late medieval Central Asia, Alisher Navoi, who is revered in contemporary Uzbekistan [26. P. 85]. The process of nation-building in the Soviet Union, in addition to the elements mentioned above, included the creation of national heroes' images from among the historical figures who had lived at various time frames within the territories of national autonomies, provided that their ideals and convictions corresponded to (or at least did not contradict) the leftist views. Most often, these figures were scholars, creative personalities, or individuals of humble origin endowed with the remarkable physical strength or exceptional cunning and intelligence, and were frequently employed against the powerful to assist ordinary people. Alisher Navoi fit this model well, that explains why he attracted Oybek's attention and why the latter devoted a significant part of his life to studying Navoi's life and works.

Odil Yoqubov (1926–2009) and Pirmqul Qodirov (1928–2010), by contrast, are better known primarily not as Soviet, but as Uzbek (national) writers. Their creative activity unfolded mainly in the postwar period. Both lived through the USSR collapse and subsequently worked for the benefit of post-Soviet Uzbekistan. During the Soviet period, Yakubov served as chief editor of Uzbekfilm. From 1987 to 1996, he was chairman of the Writers' Union of Uzbekistan. He also worked as a chairman of the Republican Terminology Committee under the Council of Ministers and as a vice president of the Assembly of Culture of the Peoples of Central Asia [27. P. 304]. Kadyrov, in turn, served as a senior research fellow at the

Institute of Language and Literature of the Academy of Sciences of Uzbekistan from 1963 to 1976 [27. P. 315]. After the USSR collapse, he was elected several times as a deputy for the Uzbek Parliament, where he served as a deputy chairman and then chairman of the Committee on Science and Culture from 1990 to 2000⁷.

Both writers influenced on the development of post-Soviet Uzbek identity primarily through their novels “*The Treasures of Ulughbeg*” (Yakubov) and “*Starry Nights*” (Kadyrov). The former focuses on Sultan Ulughbeg, while the latter is devoted to the ruler Babur. At first glance, their belonging to the ruling class might call into the question of their commitment to the leftist ideals. However, in these novels both figures are presented to the reader as champions of justice and as fighters for the welfare and people’s enlightenment. As in the case of Alisher Navoi, both Kadyrov and Yakubov devoted considerable time to studying the life paths and creative legacies of the historical figures they portrayed.

Enlighteners of the Uzbek Nation

Soviet historical fiction of the postwar period can be divided into the works set in the pre-revolutionary era and in the first half of the 20th century (the Revolution of 1917, the Civil War, the 1930s, and the Great Patriotic War). The former proved far more significant for the development of post-Soviet national self-consciousness, as deep immersion in the past enabled the expansion of the chronological (and at times even geographical) boundaries of a given nationality. In other words, the primordialization of national identity, that had begun as early as the 1930s, reached its apogee after the USSR collapse. In the case of Uzbekistan — where the Soviet past was rapidly and sharply subjected to criticism — the role of pre-revolutionary history in the construction of new national myths increased manifold. Moreover, the historical figures who later became new national idols had already been elevated during the Soviet period by the local writers [21. P. 336–337].

An examination of the sedentary part of Central Asian history⁸ allows for the identification of three major periods of political, socio-economic, and cultural flourishing in the region so far. The first upswing occurred during the existence of the Karakhanid state⁹ (840–1212). The next period of rise followed the Mongol conquests in the late medieval era, beginning with Amir Timur (1370–1405) and ending with Babur (1483–1530). The final wave of development took place during the Soviet period in the 20th century. In the official state discourse of post-Soviet Uzbekistan, the Soviet period was evaluated negatively or simply ignored [28–30]. The Karakhanid period is considered an integral part of Uzbek history, yet it has

⁷ Kadyrov P. Biografiya. *Arboblar*. Available from: <https://arboblar.uz/ru/people/kadyrov-pirimkul> (accessed: 10.07.2025).

⁸ In this case, the reference is not to the entirety of Central Asia, but only to the territory of Mawarannahr. In the steppe expanses of the eastern part of Desht-i Kipchak, where nomadic tribes lived and were transformed into the Kazakh nation in the 20th century, the situation developed somewhat differently.

⁹ The first Turkic socio-political formation in which Islam was the dominant religion.

not gained a broad resonance in mass consciousness [31; 32. P. 96–97; 33. P. 114]. The second period, by contrast, is still regarded as the golden age of Uzbek history. The most prominent figures of that era are especially revered in post-Soviet Uzbekistan. Importantly, this reverence extends not only to major statesmen or conquerors but also to distinguished scholars, creative personalities, and enlighteners¹⁰ [32. P. 91–108; 34. P. 38–43; 35. P. 155]. It was precisely this period to which the three Uzbek classics discussed above devoted their principal literary works.

Within the prevailing ideology, the Soviet authorities promoted throughout the state the value of education. Without that, it was believed, the working masses could not be fully liberated from the bourgeois oppression. Accordingly, intellectually cultivated individuals with the broad horizons often became the role models within the national cultures [36–38]. The ideal of education was subsequently integrated into the post-Soviet nation-building as well, albeit without the class-based approach. In all three of the aforementioned novels, considerable attention is devoted to the issues of enlightenment and the development of science. Without that — according to the authors — neither material prosperity nor the moral and ethical transformation of society is possible. A vivid example is Odil Yoqubov’s novel “*The Treasures of Ulughbeg*”, that tells the story of the legendary library of the great Central Asian mathematician, astronomer, and statesman, the grandson of Tamerlane, Mirzo Ulughbeg (1394–1449). Deeply devoted to science, Ulughbeg over the course of his forty-year reign collected a vast number of works from the various fields of knowledge from the lands under his control — written primarily by the authors from Arabic and Persian-speaking milieus — and housed them in Samarkand. However, fearing adherents of radical Islam who regarded the reading of non-religious literature as ungodly, he instructed his disciple Ali Qushchi to conceal the books carefully until more favorable times. The ruler justified this decision by the concern for the future generations, who would one day make proper use of this knowledge [39].

It is important to note that in all three novels, the supreme ruler or major statesman, while fulfilling his primary political and administrative functions, is simultaneously a cultural figure (for example, a poet) or an outstanding scholar. At the same time, creative or scholarly activity occupies a place in the hearts of the protagonists no less significant than affairs of state. The authors seek to demonstrate how, in the finest representatives of their nationality, a stern and cold-blooded administrator could coexist with a refined creative nature. The most brilliant minds of the high aristocracy thus become the role models who, even in the difficult conditions of feudal fragmentation — when power and social status were transmitted by birth rather than by merit, as became customary after the October

¹⁰ Alimdjanoʻv B. The great “historical” past: how a new national identity was created in Uzbekistan and Tajikistan. Available from: https://cabar.asia/ru/velikoe-istoricheskoe-proshloe-kak-sozdavalas-novaya-natsionalnaya-identichnost-v-uzbekistane-i-tadzhikistane?utm_source (accessed: 10.07.2025).

Revolution — strive, through the state's strengthening, to improve the ordinary people' lives.

On the opposite side of this divide stand their less enlightened counterparts from the same social class: various emirs and begs whose greed, indifference to the masses needs, and inability to restrain their base impulses obstruct the society's general prosperity. The feudal nobility is actively supported by a radicalized Islamic clergy that views the study of secular sciences as a devil's indulgence. By contrast, the enlightened elite represented by Ulughbeg, Navoi, and Babur are also devout Muslims, yet their faith goes hand in hand with reason. Together with their supporters, they seek to demonstrate that believers should not be confined solely to the study of religious treatises. Engagement with secular sciences does not undermine the foundations of Islamic faith. On the contrary, it helps to better comprehend the structure of the world created by Allah.

In addition to the issues of enlightenment, the novels also address — through the prism of medieval history — the aforementioned linguistic question. The Central Asian Turkic elite often used Persian in everyday communication, while Turkic was largely regarded as the language of barbarian nomads [40. P. 125]. Ulughbeg, Navoi, and Babur were fluent in both Chagatai Turkic and Persian, that effectively made them bearers of two cultures [41. P. 191]. Oybek pays particular attention to this issue in “*Navoi*”, where the outstanding late medieval poet Alisher Navoi (1441–1501) engages in active debates with the admirers of Persian poetry who claimed that the Turkic language was incapable of producing poetic works as magnificent as those written in Persian. While expressing respect for Persian poetry, Navoi does not accept this argument [42. P. 143–144]. Throughout the novel, alongside his political activities, he devotes considerable time to composing poetry in Turkic to enrich it with elevated poetic forms¹¹. Some of his disciples do the same, a practice the poet actively encourages. The life experience of one of the greatest intellectuals of late medieval Turkestan — who mastered two languages — thus becomes an instrument in the hands of the writer, through that he subtly seeks to defuse the contradiction that emerged in the eastern part of the Uzbek republic between the Turks and Persians/Tajiks, while simultaneously emphasizing, through the necessity of developing Turkic poetry, the primacy of the Uzbek language over Tajik within Uzbekistan.

Oybek himself, as one of the first intellectuals whose perception of his own national self-identification was subjected to primordialization in the 1930s, was an unwavering defender of the Uzbek nation on the cultural front. Despite his deep fascination with Navoi, he repeatedly emphasized the existence of profound cultural

¹¹ It is worth noting that the founder of the Timurid dynasty, Amir Timur himself, originated from the Central Asian steppe and built his empire in the sedentary part of the region, whose autochthonous population spoke Persian. Since warfare was the principal strength of nomadic societies, the Turkic language could be actively used in administrative and bureaucratic domains, whereas Persian long predominated in cultural life. Alisher Navoi was, by and large, one of the first cultural figures who sought to change this trend.

roots among the Uzbeks that did not originate solely in the 15th century, while simultaneously curbing attempts to truncate Uzbek history. As the examples of Uzbek literature ancient monuments, the writer pointed to the 12th century's Central Asian poets, such as Ahmad ibn Mahmud Yughnaki and Khoja Ahmad Yasawi [43. P. 73–74]. Nevertheless, in “*Navoi*” Aybek adopts a more realistic position, refraining from the use of the ethnonym “Uzbek,” since the events of the novel largely unfold in Herat¹², located in present day Afghanistan, where the Persian language had long predominated. In this context, it was far more appropriate to interpret the cultural conflict as a confrontation between the linguistic groups (Turkic vs. Persian) rather than as a clash between the languages of specific ethnicities (Uzbek vs. Tajik). At the same time, Navoi's affiliation with the Timurid aristocracy rendered him, in the perception of Uzbeks, a representative of the Uzbek nation regardless of the fact that he spent most of his life outside the territory of the modern Republic of Uzbekistan.

The objective realities of pre-revolutionary history compelled writers to consider Uzbek identity within the framework of all Turkestan or even the entirety of Central Asia. A regional approach to the study of history was thus, to some extent, reflected in fiction. Whereas “*The Treasures of Ulughbeg*” is largely confined to Mawarannahr — which territory essentially covers a significant part of present day Uzbekistan — “*Navoi*” and “*Starry Nights*” extend far beyond the boundaries not only of the Uzbek nation-state, as well of Turkestan as a whole. Herat and Astarabad, where the poet Navoi lived during his mature years, were at that time part of Khorasan¹³, that for the most part was not even included in Soviet Central Asia, while some of the events of “*Starry Nights*” unfold entirely outside Central Asia, in India, which differed markedly from Turkestan in cultural and geographical terms. Thus, the writers under consideration, while being ardent proponents of an ethno-national approach, were confronted with historical reality and were compelled — quite consciously — to transcend the limits of their territorially bounded nation-state. At the same time, all three, and Aybek in particular, emphasized the deep historical roots of their people, remaining faithful to the core tenets of Stalinist primordialism.

The theme of “regionalism” is most deeply explored by Pirimqul Qodirov in his novel “*Starry Nights*”, that is devoted to the founder of the Mughal Empire (1526–1857), Babur (1483–1530). The specific cultural disputes that, in the context of contemporary realities, might acquire a nationalist character do not constitute the main subject of the work and occupy only a marginal place within it. The narrative centers on Babur himself, or more precisely, on his life trajectory. Much attention is devoted not so much to cultural issues as to political vicissitudes and intrigues, as well as to the protagonist's personal experiences. Nevertheless, certain episodes

¹² In the Middle Ages, Herat was one of the largest cultural, economic, and political-administrative urban centers of Central Asia.

¹³ A historical region located partly in the territories of Iran, Afghanistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan.

illuminate the author's position on the national question. Thus, one of the poets, Muhammad Salih, in his dispute with Sultan Kupakbii, defends the kinship of all Turks of Turkestan. In his understanding, the Uzbeks constitute merely a part of the Turks' land, whose territory lies to the north of Khorasan. In his reasoning, the poet refers to the aforementioned Navoi, whose language is just as Turkic as that of the Uzbek khans [44. P. 163–165]. In this manner, Qodirov indirectly asserts his nation's claim to the cultural heritage of Turkestan — an unsurprising stance, given that Uzbek nationalism largely represents the realization of the Jadid idea of uniting sedentary Turkestan's all Turkic Muslims.

At the same time, the novel's principal merit lies in its artistic depiction of the Uzbek people's political successes. Babur himself hailed from Andijan, thereby making him an ancestor of the Uzbeks. Confronted with the complex situation in Turkestan and Khorasan, Babur decides to emigrate and conquer India, where he would revive the former greatness of Mawarannahr, that at the beginning of the 16th century was mired in political fragmentation and religious radicalism. The plan ultimately proved successful. The empire established by the sultan in India became a major power for several centuries, attracting scholars, cultural figures, and the finest craftsmen from Mawarannahr [44]. The conquest of so distant and vast a state as India naturally came to be regarded as one of the greatest achievements of an Uzbek ruler — and, by extension, of the entire Uzbek people — that in turn strengthened Uzbek national self-consciousness in the post-Soviet period.

In addition to Babur, "*Starry Nights*" also influenced perceptions in post-Soviet Uzbekistan of a major historical figure, Shaybani Khan (1451–1510), who — unlike the widely revered Amir Timur in Uzbekistan — was a Chingizid. In the novel, he appears as Babur's principal antagonist in Mawarannahr, whose actions ultimately force Babur to relocate to India. Since post-Soviet Uzbeks tend to identify more closely with the sedentary Timurids, the Chingizids, associated with a nomadic lifestyle, have been viewed negatively [45. P. 174–215]. In the novel, Qodirov portrays Shaybani as a malevolent tyrant who resorts to any stratagem to achieve his goals. In contrast, Babur is depicted as embodying nobility, justice, and humanism. The differences between the two commanders are illustrated, inter alia, through their attitudes toward women: Shaybani cruelly mistreats them, whereas Babur treats them with benevolence [46. P. 301–302]. The glorification of the Timurid Babur in the novel is thus accompanied by the discrediting of the Chingizid Shaybani, underscoring the portrayal of Uzbeks as a sedentary nation¹⁴. In this way, the two rulers essentially symbolize two modes of life: Timurid sedentarism, associated with the progress and cultural flourishing, and Shaybanid nomadism, represented as barbarism [47].

¹⁴ In the geopolitics of Central Asia, Uzbek sedentarism may be contrasted with post-Soviet Kazakhs, who regard themselves as the heirs of the great nomadic empires of the Eurasian steppe.

Conclusion

The process of forming post-Soviet Uzbek national identity did not begin with the USSR collapse. The national projects on the territory of Uzbekistan began to emerge with the penetration of modernity into Turkestan in the pre-revolutionary period. The Jadid enlighteners made a significant contribution to the modernization of social consciousness.

After the October Revolution, the Bolsheviks embarked on a course of nation-building in the eastern peripheries of Russia in order to overcome the socio-cultural fragmentation of the communities residing there. An active nationalities policy became a prerequisite for implementing a large-scale industrialization across the former Russian Empire. Most of Soviet Turkestan, that had previously consisted of several political entities, became the territorial foundation for the creation of the Uzbek nation, whose culture, historiography, and language were fully shaped only during the Soviet period. Alongside the Bolsheviks and local communists, the Jadids also took an active part in the nation-building process in Uzbekistan. Initially, Soviet nations were regarded as products of the revolution. However, under the USSR conditions faced in the 1930s, they acquired a primordial character. This shift inevitably affected Uzbekistan, that came to be endowed with deep historical roots and a natural “habitat”. Soviet nationalities policy also contributed to the formation of a cohort of national intellectuals, among whom writers were particularly important. Their works played a key role in popularizing historical figures who would later enter the pantheon of national heroes in post-Soviet Uzbekistan.

A crucial role was played by the novels on the late medieval history of Turkestan — *“The Treasures of Ulughbeg”*, *“Navoi”*, and *“Starry Nights”* — written by the leading Uzbek SSR’s writers: Oybek, Pirimqul Qodirov, and Odil Yoqubov. All three works are devoted to the most prominent statesmen of that era — Mirzo Ulughbeg, Alisher Navoi, and Babur — who combined political and administrative functions with the pursuits in science and / or poetry. Each of them worked for the benefit and enlightenment of the people, while simultaneously opposing religious radicals and the feudal aristocracy. Responding to the pressing socio-cultural problems of their society through the prism of the historical novel, Oybek, Qodirov, and Yoqubov created national heroes who subsequently became symbols of enlightenment, greatness, and national unity in ethnically heterogeneous Uzbekistan during and after the USSR collapse. The era of these heroes came to be perceived as a kind of golden age of the Uzbek nation. As a result, the primordialization of Uzbek identity continued to develop in the post-Soviet period, albeit without the influence of socialist ideology.

When it comes to the conceptualization of “nationalism” from the non-literary perspective it could be argued that “however, as economic diversification of the Republic of Kazakhstan is becoming so essential for the past five years, economic factor of Resource Nationalism is on the way of becoming agenda today” [48] in terms of neighboring Central Asian state’s economic advancement where literary

national identity is still discussed from the resource nationalism perspective, but historians and philosophers would disagree for sure but “the image of Kazakhstan constructed in readers’ minds is based on several key associations” [49] including on resource nationalism so far.

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